

## **Ethnicity and Sexual Violence in The Conflict of South Sudan**

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**ABSTRACT:** *South Sudan gained independence in 2011 after a much applauded referendum. The euphoria of this accomplishment was beclouded by ethnic conflicts which degenerated into a civil war in December 2013. The aim of this study was to examine the conflict that degenerated into a civil war in South Sudan and orchestrated gruesome sexual violence. In accordance, the study was guided by the following research questions. Why is the civil war in South Sudan said to be an ethnic conflict? How is sexual violence manifesting in the conflict of South Sudan? The instrumentalist theory of ethnic conflict as propounded by Pierre Duhem was adopted as the theoretical framework of this study. The research employed a qualitative method of study. The study found out that South Sudan is a composition of more than 60 ethnic groups but the Dinka, Nuer and to a lesser degree the Murle are the most prominent. Incidentally, the conflicts that have engulfed and devastated all of South Sudan emanated and proliferated from these major ethnic groups. The conflict in South Sudan was characterized by sexual violence such as rape, sexual slavery, sexual torture, sexual mutilation etc. The study concludes that ethnicity is the fundamental causal factor of the conflict of South Sudan that is characterized by sexual violence and other atrocities. The study recommends that South Sudan should harness its rich national heritage of multi-ethnicity for unity in diversity as opposed to the prevailing parochial barbarity of ethnic conflicts.*

**KEYWORDS:** South Sudan, ethnic conflict, sexual violence, dinka, nuer

### **INTRODUCTION**

The South Sudanese Civil War that commenced on 15 December 2013 is characterized by ethnically orchestrated sexual violence and other atrocities. The war began with a political dispute wherein President Kiir accused Vice President Machar etc. of plotting a coup d'état. This allegation and crisis arising therefrom led to the cleavage of South Sudan People's Liberation (SPLM) into SPLM in government (SPLM-IG) and SPLM in opposition (SPLM-IO) as the crisis degenerated into full-blown multi-sided civil war with ethnic colourations (Kulish, 2014; Nyagoah, 2022). The conflict in South Sudan is characterized by sexual violence and other atrocities.

The aim of the study is to examine the conflict that degenerated into a civil war in South Sudan and generated gruesome sexual violence. In accordance, the study was guided by the following

**research questions.** Why is the civil war in South Sudan said to be an ethnic conflict? How is sexual violence manifesting in the conflict of South Sudan?

Instrumentalism is the theoretical framework of this study and is of the opinion that ethnicity is used as a device by leaders and potential leaders to unite and garner the solidarity of the broad mass of a population for purposes of achieving ulterior motives. Such ulterior motives are fundamentally for the acquisition of political power, realisation of self-governance, access to resources, autonomy and other political and socio-economic interest (Britannica 2019). Pierre Duhem is a major proponent of the theory of instrumentalism. The theory of instrumentalism is of the view that ethnicity is neither intrinsically valuable nor innate in human nature but a tool or instrument for achieving vital interest and ulterior objectives (Varshney 2002). This is predicated on the fact that people who have a common heritage tend to identify with the course and plight of ethnic nationalities – which can easily be exploited by leaders who seek effective mass mobilisation to gain access to valuable scarce resources, influence public policies and other vital interest (Yeghiazaryan, 2009).

Qualitative method is the research methodology of the study. It consists of content and documentary analysis whereby data were gathered through mainly secondary sources of data. The gathered data were reviewed and analysed. The article is divided into four sections. We are already in the first section which is the introduction. Ethnic conflict in South Sudan is the second section while sexual violence in the conflict of South Sudan is the third section. The fourth section comprises the conclusion and recommendations.

### **Ethnic Conflict in South Sudan**

Ethnicity is a conception or social phenomenon that portrays the consciousness of ethnic identity as well as the passionate sense of belonging to an ethnic group. The continent of Africa, feature prominently in discourses of ethnicity with specificity to conflict. This is particularly so because of the multi-ethnic nature of African states and societies. The cleavages, disharmony, atrocities, political instability, and gruesome conflicts of South Sudan and other African countries are largely predicated on ethnicity (Shukila & Okeke-Uzodike 2013).

An ethnic conflict is a war between two or more rival ethnic groups. While the causal factor of the war could be socio-economic, political or religious in nature, the warring factions must willfully fight to defend the stand or course of their ethnicity within the society or country. This parameter distinguishes ethnic conflict from other conflicts or wars ((Varshney 2002; Kaufman, 2001). “South Sudan like many other multi-ethnic societies, has also been trapped in a cycle of political power competition that exploits ethnic identity as the primary base of attracting and establishing political support” (Cheeseman, 2015 p.6).

Most scholars postulate that conflicts associated with rebellion and rebel groups emanate more often than not from ethnicity because the leadership of ethnic groups tend to magnify grievances with ethnic connotation for better mass mobilisation that serves as launching pad or strong bargaining chip for the realisation of ulterior goals (Denny& Walter, 2014). In a nutshell ethnicity is ethnic identity which is a common cause of conflicts not exclusively in Africa, but

also in other continents of the world such as Asia, Europe, and the Middle East (Cheeseman, 2015; Agwanda &Asal, 2020).

Barely two years after South Sudan gained independence as a sovereign state; a major civil war erupted. Military forces that were loyal to President Salva Kiir of South Sudan and those loyal to his vice – Riek Machar were engulfed in a bone of contention predicated on Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) succession disputes over the SPLM flag bearer for the presidential elections of 2015, tenure and term in office for the position of SPLM Chairperson, code of conduct and other constitutional issues. The dispute worsened with the allegation that the camp of Vice President Machar were plotting a coup to overthrow President Kiir (Johnson 2014; Nyadera, 2019).

There are more than sixty ethnic groups in South Sudan but the Dinka and Nuer are to a large extent the two dominant and most populous (Verini 2014; Zhongnan, 2020). The Dimka and the Nuer have used their vantage massive population to dominate the politics of South Sudan. Little wonder why President Kiir is of Dinka ethnicity while Vice PresidentMachar is of Nuer ethnicity. The desire to consolidate power through ethnic strongholds precipitated the outbreak of South Sudan’s civil war on 15 December 2013with the massacre of the Nuer in Juba (Idra, 2019; BBC News, 22 Dec 2013).

The Juba Massacre was committed in the formative stages of the civil war when about 300 men of Nuer ethnicity were captured and forced into a police station room in the Gudele region of Juba, and brutally killed by Dinka soldiers (The Guardian, 23 Dec 2013). Detail information of the official death toll is still scanty as Human Rights Watch indicate that the government of South Sudan blocked access. However, eyewitness accounts confirmed the carrying away with big trucks of the corpses of people killed to undisclosed sites on 18 December 2013 (Human Rights Watch, 18 Feb 2018).

The Juba Nuer Massacre eventually precipitated massive defections from the ruling party and military of South Sudan, with large scale Nuer members dissenting Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Government (SPLM-IG) to join Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in opposition (SPLM-IO) under the command of Riek Machar. The Juba Nuer Massacre also became a rallying point and unification factor for different ethnic militants and aggrieved armed groups such as the Nuer White Army who pledged loyalty to Machar’s SPLM IO (Mesfine, 2018).

The vicious circle of ethnically incited retaliatory raids manifested in the Bentiu Massacre when more than 200 people of Dinka extraction were killed on 15 April 2014 by Nuer militants. Various displaced people were taking refuge in strategic mosque and church which are normally respected as safe sanctuaries in time of conflict. Unfortunately, Nuer militants besieged the sanctuaries and separated people based on ethnic lines. The people of Dinka ethnicity and other tribes considered as foe were executed by Nuer militant (YahooNews, 2014).

Evidently, the massacre of Nuer people by Dinka militias in Juba sequel to the contentious political dispute between President Kiir and Vice-president Macharin in December 2013 became the casus belli of South Sudan's civil war. From that moment, Kiir and Machar solicited and effectively garnered the allegiance of the broad mass of their ethnic nationality for the conflict. It may however be argued that the conflict was not in totality ethnic in nomenclature because not all the people of Dinka supported Kiir and same is applicable to the Mr. Machar who is not in totality controlling the appreciation and followership of his Nuer ethnic nationality (Zhongnan, 2020).

People have been predominantly targeted on ethnic lines but there have been some exceptional cases where Nuer soldiers and civil servants remained loyal to the SPLM-IG of President Kiir. Conversely, the followership of the Rick Machar led SPLM-IO is not exclusively Nuer in ethnicity. There were situations where the people of Nuer ethnicity were killed by Nuer militias because of perceived political inclination (Zhongnan, 2020).

The SPLM-IO gathered an overwhelming majority of its followers from the people of Nuer ethnic nationality whose military was predominately the Nuer White Army militia (Mesfine, 2018). As the conflict intensified and precipitated the seizure of grazing and farming lands by the people of Dinka; the Arrow Boys – a militia group located in the Western Equatoria region of South Sudan pledged solidarity to the SPLM-IO. For the same reason other militia have pledged allegiance to the Machar led SPLM-IO. Though the solidarity is fluid and ambiguous, it has weakened the structures of the SPLM-IG. The National Democratic Movement (NDM) is one of the groups that pledged solidarity to the SPLM-IO because of the atrocities of the people of Dinka. The SPLM-IO also received support from some East African countries such as Sudan and Ethiopia (Mesfine, 2018).

In the conflicts of South Sudan, various tribes have been targeting people on ethnic lines. As a matter of fact, a coalition of ethnic groups started targeting people of Dinka ethnic nationality in particular as the conflict intensified. A case in point was the incidence at Juba-Yei road wherein commercial vehicles were stopped and commuters identified and separated on ethnic bases. The people of Dinka tribe were separated and executed (Okiror, 14 Nov 2016).

Despite the huge population and control of state power in South Sudan, the people of Dinka ethnic group are also refugees fleeing to available refugee camps for refuge but they are always attacked by people of other ethnic groups as retribution (Washington Post, 19 Nov 2016). It is for this reason that Ugandan authorities normally situate Dinka refugees in separate locations to reduce reprisal attacks and violence (Partinkin & Foltyn, 12 Jul 2017).

The Civil War in Sudan engulfed and permeated all the ethnic groups in South Sudan but the major belligerents were the Dinka versus the Nuer thereby making some people to refer to it as Dinka-Nuer civil war (Watson, 2021) . Over the years, there have been conflicts between the Dinka and the Nuer given rise to ethnic massacres such as the Bor Massacre. Evidently, Riek Machar, who is the leader of the SPLM-IO was the coordinator of the Bor Massacre of 1991 against the people of Dinka ethnicity by the Nuer White Army and other militia of Nuer

ethnicity (Agwanda &Asal, 2020). Often regarded as the deadliest massacre in the history of South Sudan; the Bor massacre was committed in Bor which is the capital city of Jonglei state that is predominantly inhabited by the people of Nuer and a minority of Dinka ethnic nationality. It led to the gruesome killing of more than 2000 Dinka people, barbaric atrocities and destruction of precious properties (Wild, Jok and Ronak 2018; Agwanda & Asal, 2020). Before the Bor massacre, inter-ethnic raids for cattle between the different ethnic groups were a common practice between different ethnic groups including the Nuer versus the Dinka (Glowacki & Wrangham, 2015; Agwanda &Asal, 2020). Formation of armed ethnic militias such as the Titweng Militia of Dinka and the Nuer White Army were informed by the need to safeguard lives, abductions of children, and destruction of properties orchestrated during the cattle raids (Young, 2016; Nyadera, 2019)

The Murle ethnic group is another relatively large ethnicity of South Sudan. Of the approximately sixty ethnic groups that make up South Sudan, Dinka is the largest, followed by the Nuer while the people of Murle ethnicity could be said to be third in the population hierarchy of South Sudan. Incidentally, ethnic violence and conflicts emanate the most from these three most populous ethnic groups. Invariably, in South Sudan, “the main inter-ethnic rivalries are limited to the major ethnic groups of the Dinka and the Nuer and, to a lesser degree, the Murle” (Shukila & Okeke-Uzodike 2013 p.4).

The Pibor massacre was one of the most catastrophic incidences of the raging ethnic conflicts in South Sudan and was committed a couple of months after South Sudan gained and celebrated independence as the newest sovereign state in the world. It was an episode of the perennial ethnic conflict between the Murle and the Nuer.

The Uror massacre of 18 August 2011 was one of the gruesome ethnic violence of South Sudan. It was a hostile military attack launched against the Nuer people residing in Uror County of the Jonglei province by Murle militia that led to the death of more than 640 people. The attackers destroyed more than 3,400 houses, abducted more than 208 children and stole more than 38,000 herds of cattle. Evidently, the attack was a reprisal measure against the Nuer tribe for the June 2011 brutal operation in Pibor county (Sudan Tribune, 29 Aug 2011).

The Nuer versus Murle ethnic crisis in various communities of Jonglei State in South Sudan, normally gives rise to devastating assaults, burning down of besieged communities, abductions, theft and killings in the proportion of ethnic cleansing that perpetuates a cycle of retaliatory raids and reprisal attacks. It is for this reason that the government of South Sudan declared a state of emergency on Jonglei state as a disaster area (Associated Press, 2012). The conflict between the Nuer versus Murle assumed international dimension when Murle militia on 15 April 2016 crossed over to the Jikawo and Lare areas in Ethiopia to kill Nuer refugees. The Jikawo and Lare areas of Ethiopia at this time hosted more than 300,000 South Sudanese refugees and Murle militia killed 208 people, abducted 108 women and children and stole 2000 cattle from the people of Nuer (The Telegraph, 17 Apr 2016; BBC News, 18 Apr 2016).



The violation of Ethiopia's territorial integrity by Murle militia was not treated with levity because Ethiopian troops quickly sprang into action and gunned down more than 60 of the Murle militia. With the consent of the government of South Sudan, Ethiopian troops crossed over to South Sudan to hunt for the people behind the killings and abductions and about 100 abducted children were eventually retrieved (Aljazeera, 15 Mar 2017).

In the context of South Sudan, the phrase 'ethnic conflict' depicts unpredictable warfare by militants from a given ethnic group attacking people and communities of rival groups for herds of cattle, land and precious resources (Watson, 2021). The phrase evokes "anarchic imagery of scrappy groups of young men armed with Kalashnikovs meting out rounds of punishment in rural areas untouched by state authority, in what are ostensibly lateral conflicts between contending ethnic units" (Watson, 2021 p.3).

There have been vast and varied concerted efforts to mitigate the violence and security challenges emanating from the conflict by local and national committees to no avail. The conflict in South Sudan persists and renders people, communities, institution, etc. very fragile and vulnerable (Shukila & Okeke-Uzodike 2013). In a nutshell the Civil War that began on December 15, 2013 in South Sudan with "targeted attacks against civilians on an ethnic basis have taken place in both government and opposition-controlled areas" (Human Rights Watch, p1. 2014).

### **Sexual Violence in the Conflict of South Sudan**

Sexual violence in conflict, which is sometimes referred to as wartime sexual violence are rape and other violence related to the sexual organs that are committed by armed forces while an armed conflict is raging, in a military occupation or actual war; regarded in some cases as part of the spoils of war. In ethnic conflict, sexual violence has wider sociological undertones and used to commit atrocities such as gang rapes and rape with objects (Benedict, 2008).

The Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) is an internationally renowned data-set on sexual violence in conflict. The SVAC defines war time sexual violence as the sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors which may be the armed forces of a sovereign state, rebel groups, ethnic militants, pro-government militias etc. in times of war and the period immediately after a war. Sexual violence committed by civilians who took advantage of a prevailing conflict may also be regarded as sexual violence (Nordås & Cohen, 2021). The SVAC stipulates seven types of wartime sexual violence and they are: "(a) rape, (b) sexual slavery, (c) forced prostitution, (d) forced pregnancy, (e) forced sterilization/abortion, (f) sexual mutilation, and (g) sexual torture" (Nordås & Cohen, 2021 p.1).

United Nations (UN) officials have raised alarm and particular attention to the ethnically targeted rape and sexual violence prevalent in the civil war of South Sudan (Blanchard, 2016). On account of the gruesome atrocities of the Civil War in South Sudan; the United Nation Security Council Resolution (SCR) 2206 was passed for peace keeping and building. The Panel of SCR 2206 found out that all the warring factions in the conflict of South Sudan deliberately committed rape and sexual violence on their opponents as well as purposively targeting

civilians as part of their military strategy (Blanchard, 2016). In the course of the conflict the investigative team of the SCR 2206 panel “documented 217 cases of sexual violence, some by government soldiers, in July 2016 in Juba alone” (Blanchard, 2016 p.5)

Brutal rape and massacres soar in the aggressive raids by the belligerents and those that survive the onslaught are internally displaced or sometimes die in their hideouts because the wanton arson on their homes. A great proportion of the cases of sexual violence were committed by organized military and rebel actors, and especially SSPDF pro-government militants (Watson, 2021).

Women and children are unduly negatively affected in the hostilities of the war in South Sudan. A predominance of South Sudanese refugees in United Nations’ displacement camps are women and children. Also sexual violence and raping of girls and women is widespread. Recently, the United Nations reported a tremendous increase in sexual attacks on girls and women. Incidences of sexual abuse are normally committed in the process of raids in the homes of victims; including those attempting to escape or flee from the aggressor as well as in the process of the victim(s) moving out their homes in search of food, water etc. To make matters worse, those committing these atrocities are rarely arrested nor prosecuted for their crimes. Despite the very insecure environment of South Sudan as triggered by the conflict, girls and women still bear the brunt of family caretaking. The daily chores of girls and women such as fetching of water, firewood, agricultural products, purchase of food items etc. makes the female gender very vulnerable to attack, rape and sexual violence (Mercy Corps, 24 Jun 2019).

"People have suffered enough. Civilians — especially those most vulnerable — women, children, the elderly and the disabled — bear the brunt of this prolonged crisis,Nyanti said” (Ponnie, 29 Dec 2022 p.3). The Civil War in South Sudan has been described as one of the most brutal and bloodiest conflict in the history of South Sudan because of its increasing targeting of women and children trait (Shukila & Okeke-Uzodike 2013). Women have voiced concerns over the quota of women in peace negotiations. The female gender constitute the larger population of South Sudan and bear the brunt of the raging conflict but are not accorded adequate representation in peace negotiation forum (Mesfine, 2018).

Despite the ratification of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS); the Commission on Human Rights on South Sudan (CoHR) have reported that “women and girls continue to be victims of rape and sexual violence, including gang rape, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, forced pregnancy, forced abortion and the mutilation of sexual organs.” (Zhongnan, 2020 p.2) In another vein the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMISS) reported that there were “1,157 cases of sexual violence during the year 2018 as compared to 196 cases during the year 2017” (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect` s 2018 p.2).

Possession of cattle and grazing land plus water to sustain cattle is the fundamental causal factor of internecine conflicts between the different ethnic groups of South Sudan. Herds of cattle are not just a cherished source of meat and milk but the unit of measuring wealth or

currency in South Sudan. Twenty cows is the standard bride price for marriage and the major ethnic groups of South Sudan are predominantly cattle herders (Ashiru, 5 Feb 2017; Taylor, 2012). In South Sudan, “cattle are historical symbols of social status, and their products which are of high nutritional value are important sources of livelihood among South Sudanese communities” (Glowacki and Wrangham 2015 p.349).

More so, there is a symbiotic relationship between ownership of cattle and sense of masculinity in South Sudan as a man who does not own cattle is not only perceived as been very poor but also not having manliness (Martell, 2019). The people of Dinka, Nuer, Murle and other ethnic groups deprived of their cattle through cattle raids are always thirsty for revenge and use every means including membership of militants groups to regain lost cattle (Martell, 2019). In some of the communities of South Sudan, raiding of cattle is part of the masculine initiation process. These traditions and practices orchestrate cattle raiding and internecine conflicts in South Sudan (Shukila & Okeke-Uzodike 2013).

More than 5,000 people were killed between 2011 through 2017 in the process of cattle raids in South Sudan. On 9 July 2011, South Sudan became an independent nation after 98% of voters choose independence from Sudan in a referendum (Martell, 2019). It became an independent sovereign state after a gruesome civil war that lingered form more than twenty-five years (Mercy Corps, 24 Jun 2019). In a nutshell the conflict in South Sudan was characterized by sexual violence such as rape, sexual slavery, sexual torture, forced prostitution, sexual mutilation, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, etc.

## CONCLUSION

The conflict in Sudan that plunged into a civil in December 2013 has claimed the lives of more than 400,000 people. The social fabric and infrastructure of South Sudan has also been destroyed with survivors groaning in mental health scars (Nyagoah, 2022).

The study found out that South Sudan is a composition of more than 60 ethnic groups but the Dinka, Nuer and to a lesser degree the Murle are the most prominent. Incidentally, the conflicts that have engulfed and devastated all of Sudan emanated and proliferated from these major ethnic groups. The Dimka and the Nuer have used their vantage massive population to dominate the politics of South Sudan. Little wonder why President Kiir is of Dinka ethnicity while Vice President Machar is of Nuer ethnicity. The conflict in South Sudan was characterized by sexual violence such as rape, sexual slavery, sexual torture, forced prostitution, sexual mutilation, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, etc.

The study concludes that ethnicity is the fundamental causal factor of the conflicts that degenerated into the civil war of South Sudan that is characterized by sexual violence and other atrocities. The study recommends that South Sudan should harness its rich national heritage of multi-ethnicity for unity in diversity as opposed to the prevailing parochial barbarity of ethnic conflicts. Warring factions need to leave children and harmless women out of their conflict.



There should be heavy penalty and punishment for any person or troop that commits sexual violence.

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